

Ask an Expert – Five Ways to Share the Mental Load in Marriage

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Have you ever felt mentally exhausted as you try to remember the never-ending to-do list in your head?

It goes something like this:

Remember to bring a treat to your child's class party, call the insurance company about an unclear charge, return an Amazon package, and call in that prescription. Which reminds you, it's time to get your dog's heartworm medicine ordered, and don't forget to buy a gift for your child for the birthday party on Friday, and wash the track uniform for the track meet, also on Friday...yikes!

There is a massive mental work load that people tend to carry in their heads. And by people, we mean mothers.

Studies suggest that the bulk of "worry work" is mainly carried by moms – nearly 9 out of 10 of them say they feel solely responsible for organizing the family's schedule.

Why is this so exhausting?

It turns out that the brain can only really focus on three to four things at a time. When it switches focus between tasks and upcoming tasks, it uses brain energy, and there's only so much of it to go around. It doesn't take long for this invisible work and mental load to take its toll and overflow!

The result? Frustrated, burned out, stressed out, overwhelmed, anxious moms. And this leads to connection killers in relationships: anger and resentment.

It's not possible to keep up with the physical, mental, and emotional work at a crazy pace without it taking a toll on your relationships with your children and your partner. One sure sign it's gone too far? Having a tough time controlling your temper, tongue, and tone of voice at home.

Here are five ways couples can share the mental load.

1. Bring awareness to the invisible work. Raise awareness about your mental load and the toll it's taking. If it's not on your partner's radar, change will seldom happen, and burnout and resentment will continue.

Without criticizing or attacking, offer some concrete examples of what you are experiencing. For example, "I often feel exhausted and mentally tired. I've recently read about what it may be stemming from – it's called 'worry work,' and I'd love to share what I've been experiencing." Then share a few examples. Make it clear that this isn't you just worrying too much or complaining. It's an exhausting mental load that affects your mood and attitude throughout the day, and it spills over into family relationships.

2. Divide and decide. After you discuss the load, it's time to share the load. This will look different for every family situation. For the partner who is not carrying the bulk of the worry work, instead of responding with, "Just tell me what to do," try something like, "I've noticed you have a lot on your plate. I don't always know what to do to help you, so can you give me some things to take on as my responsibility?"

3. Lighten the load with technology. We have a lot of great technology that can help us get the worry out of our brains and onto a task list. For example, Alexa or Siri can add items to your grocery list and set reminders. You can also set up auto-orders on things such as toilet paper, laundry detergent, pet food, and paper towels to lighten your brain load. Or try apps for planning and organizing that are shared across the family. Maple, Bublup, and Todoist are just a few that allow you to add tasks and to-dos that can be assigned and shared across devices.

4. Let go of control. While the mental load can feel overwhelming, for some women it may seem easier to just do it all rather than risk it not getting done right. For example, women can often fall into the habit of gatekeeping when it comes to household labor. This may include monitoring, criticizing, or correcting the way her

partner or child does chores, which may easily discourage them from fully engaging. Try letting go of some control by discussing each of your strengths, challenges, and preferences. Allow everyone to try new things and be patient through changes.

5. Keep checking in. Have regular conversations. Remember these require patience, flexibility, awareness, and expressions of appreciation for both partners. Discuss upcoming activities that bring stress. A helpful question is, “Tell me what your day looks like tomorrow,” then see what you can do to help lighten the mental load.

But be aware – it is best for couples NOT to discuss any of this when either of you are feeling: hungry, angry, hangry, lonely, or tired. Late at night in bed is not the best time to bring up demands and to-dos.

“Worry work” is quickly becoming one of the top struggles for couples, but it is often not talked about. It is important for each partner to be mindful of the other and communicate regularly to avoid burnout and resentment. It is definitely worth the effort to help keep balance and peace at home.

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